

## Warning signs and grounds for hope

By [A. Katherine Grieb](#)

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In the state where I live sometimes it's hard to tell which is scarier, Halloween or election day—a useful reminder that Christians are constantly besieged both by supernatural powers and by the results of our own sinfulness, whether individual or communal. Recent tragedies in [Texas](#) and [Florida](#) vividly focus our attention on the already overstrained system of military deployment and the rising rate of unemployment in our nation—and on the tremendous human costs of these: overwhelming stress, fear and despair. Every day the newspaper reports another teen suicide, drug overdose, drunken-driver fatality or story of a parent who's killed a spouse, children and self.

When we turn to the news of the world and the health of the planet, the amount of suffering and sorrow is almost unbearable. I force myself not to turn the pages too quickly in self-protection—and I'm one of the lucky ones who has work, food and housing and a stable government. I can only imagine the terrors faced by other people in our world, especially children.

As always, the word of the Lord is right on time. Although we may not have expected to hear much "good news" from apocalyptic texts such as Daniel and Mark, they seem to know what we need before we do. They comfort us by confronting us, forcing us to decide between reality and illusion. They ask us hard questions about where we put our trust.

[Daniel 12](#) is well known as one of the go-to places for framing a biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the dead: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt." The wise shall shine like the stars, fixed and bright-shining forever. The vision given to Daniel (and also to us) is one of hope in a time of anguish such as the world has never seen.

Who will deliver us? Who is Israel's protector, the deliverer of the people of the book? The revealed name "Micha-El" means "Who is like God," which is both a question and a proclamation. As a question, it reflects the [song](#) at the Red Sea: "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?" The implied answer is "No one!" There is no one like God, who alone deserves our trust. God is the only one who can deliver us.

"Micha-El" is also—and Christians especially find it natural to read it this way—a confession of faith. Yes, there is one "who is like God," who was with God in the beginning, God's Word and Wisdom, Jesus Christ, whom we name God and Lord, among the plethora of possible gods and lords whom others trust.

Daniel 12 is well paired with the beginning of Mark 13. Here, Jesus' disciples, instead of feeling overwhelmed by anguished suffering, are blissfully unaware of danger as they stroll the temple grounds. Mark paints them as Galilean bumpkins impressed by Jerusalem skyscrapers: wow, check out these huge stones; what about the height of this temple! (In fairness to the disciples, even worldly travelers today stand amazed at the size of the stones supporting the temple mount, and these are not the stones of the building itself, now completely demolished.)

Jesus is unimpressed: "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." In Mark's story, the disciples take a while to process this information. Later, as Jesus is sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, a smaller delegation asks him privately, "When will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" The rest of Mark 13 is Jesus' answer to these two questions, in reverse order: first warning signs, then the question of timing.

Jesus warns his disciples not to be led astray by premature announcements of the end times. Drawing on the traditional description of a false prophet (one who will lead many astray), Jesus anticipates the apparently perennial phenomenon of dramatic predictions of the immediate end designed to frighten God's people into whatever particular form of repentance the prophet prefers. Bad news sells: "if it bleeds, it leads" is the mantra of our news media, and bad news about the end times has been selling well for many centuries.

The best antidote to fear-mongering prognosticators is prayer like that of [Psalm 16](#): "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge." Who is like God? Thanks be to God for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!